A nice, fun short story. Murderbot is sarcastic and funny, and easy to enjoy.

This is not a story that requires a lot of brainpower, it's very light reading, so it's good fun no matter what your mood. I read it within a day. And then read the other four books and two short stories that had been published at the time within the next four days.

I enjoyed reading it.

But there are some problems that might not seem big for this story, but add up to huge problems the more you read in the series. If you're just looking for a review of All Systems Red, then you can just stop here. There's no spoilers, it just won't be relevant to you if you only plan to read this book.

If you plan to read the whole series, then keep on reading.

It gets three stars for being entertaining.

It loses two stars for several reasons:

1) Refusing to explicitly state that Murderbot's pronouns are it/its. This story, and the series it started, is constantly touted as "amazing nonbinary representation", but despite how many opportunities there are in this short story to have Murderbot explicitly state and choose its pronouns to be it/its, Martha Wells chooses to take the coward's way out, leaving a huge amount of the fandom misgendering

Murderbot left and right, and insisting it's a man or a woman.

It's also just very clearly biological essentialism. Murderbot is only nonbinary and aroace because it's a robot who doesn't have any secondary or primary sex characteristics.

(and yes, people, it is a robot. Just because Martha Wells decided to complicate things and use "construct" in place of "anthroid" --

(Anthroid = android but gender neutral, because male default language is annoying, and especially annoying to use for nonbinary characters. If you weren't aware, android literally means "robot designed to look like a male human. The female equivalent is gynoid. The

androgynous equivalent would be androgynoid. Anthroid confers no gender and much easier to type)

--doesn't mean it's not a robot. It's not a /bot/, because bot in this setting means a mechanical robot. Murderbot, as an anthroid, is both mechanical and organic. It's still a robot. It is not a cyborg. A cyborg is an ORGanism that has been enhanced with CYBernetics. Augmented humans in this setting are cyborgs. Constructs are not.)

There are no reocurring human nonbinary or aroace characters in this series as of 2024, with book 7: System Collapse.

There are two characters who use neopronouns, but they only appear for about three pages, never to be seen or mentioned again. We have canon polyamorous

and mspec (mspec is short for multi spectrum which is short for "the spectrum of being attracted to more than one gender") and presumably lesbian human characters, but no canon aroace human characters, and no main human characters who are trans in any way, and especially not in a nonbinary way.

This is yet another example in the long history of the exorsexist "nonbinary robot/alien stereotype". Cis people cannot imagine anyone having a gender that's not male or female, because they equate gender with physical sex, and equate both of these with pronouns.

The only people in this series who use it/its pronouns or are explicitly aroace are all literal sexless robots. The only nonbinary people who actually matter to the story are those same literally sexless robots. And when we do randomly get a nonbinary human, they show up for a few pages for brownie points, then are promptly discarded.

Why am I telling you all of this? Because a ton of people go around preaching this series as The Best Trans Representation Ever and I think it's wrong to lie to people to get them to read books.

This series is not good trans representation, it's not good nonbinary representation, it's not even good representation for people who use it/its pronouns. Because it's all just rooted in biological essentialism. If we go off what these books show us, Martha Wells doesn't believe that you can be human and be nonbinary, or aroace, or use it/its pronouns.

Those are only things that literally sexless robots in fiction can do. And her refusal to write in a way that's not biologically essentialist has made the fandom for this series complete unintollerable as an actual real

nonbinary person who is aroace and uses it/its pronouns.

She refuses to have Murderbot tell anyone its pronouns, so the fandom thinks they can misgender Murderbot with any pronouns they want, and it's not misgendering or exorsexism in any way. And this is literally Martha Wells' responsability. She is allowing this bigotry to thrive in her fans because she refuses to do anything to refute it in her books. She wants the points and free advertising she'll get by having a character who uses other neopronouns appear for five seconds, but she doesn't actually want to commit by having nonbinary humans as main, important characters.

You should not be reading this series because you think it'll be groundbreaking, thoughtful, purposeful representation of trans and nonbinary and aroace people. Because it's not. It's just the same tired

stereotypes as ever, and not even comitting to those stereotypes enough to let Murderbot tell people its pronouns are it/its.

2) The second star is lost for two reasons. One is retroactive. If I'd left a review as soon as I read the book, I wouldn't have taken this one away, but now that I've read the other 6 books in the series so far, I have to, because Martha Wells continues to fail, spectacularly, to plan ahead. This is a much bigger problem in her Books of the Raksura, because they're full-length novels with a "bigger" world, but it is still very much present, and a problem, here in The Murderbot Diaries. And it all starts here in All Systems Red.

This is a short novel (around 30,000 words long), so all of the characterization and worldbuilding that is in it is important. Unfortunately, she sets it up so that the human characters from Preservation are all, as

far as we see in this book, completely unfamiliar with the idea of robots being sentient, seeing Murderbot as just another mindless appliance, like a toaster. A thing that just performs a function, without any thoughts or feelings on the matter that need to be considered.

Except...all of the later books prove this completely untrue. They have robots on Preservation, who are treated as second-class citizens, yes (they literally are owned like property, as Murderbot states many times as a reason it doesn't want to go) but they're very clearly treated as people whose thoughts and feelings matter. Or at least the humans pretend they care.

So now, rereading All Systems Red, and seeing the Preservation team treating Murderbot like a mindless automaton...it doesn't work. We know that they know better, there's literally zero excuse for their behavior in this book.

Martha Wells clearly did not plan to continue the series after this book, or al least she didn't plan to ever have us "see" Preservation to realize how contradictory these two ideas are. (That the Preservation team had No Idea that Murderbot was a person vs The Preservation team automatically views all robots as people to befriend).

It's not until the Preservation team sees Murderbot's anthroid face and hear its voice that they go "oh it's a person!". But we now know they're literally around non-anthroid robots all day on their home planet, so rather than this being a sympathetic thing in a "they couldn't have known any better" way, it's...actually a condemnation, and is actively making them look worse.

Especially with Gurathin, who treats Murderbot absolutely horribly in this first book, which is absolutely not even remotely justified by anything we see after of his backstory living on Preservation. He's now, retroactively, an even worse person than he was originally, because Martha Wells didn't plan ahead to what she wanted Preservation to actually look like.

And then she didn't even double check what she'd already written to make sure her new stuff lined up with the old!

So we get a huge problem where the characters who seem wonderful and sympathetic and Doing Their Best™ in this book are now retroactively being absolutely horrible, on purpose, with no excuse for their behavior, because we know they're not simply ignorant of the fact that robots are sentient.

This is a huge problem in Martha Wells writing that I first noticed in The Books of the Raksura, and it's just continuing in The Murderbot Diaries. She doesn't plan ahead, and doesn't look back to make sure things line up, and the results are an absolute disaster for characterization and worldbuilding. It might not seem like a big deal at first, but once you've read the whole series and go back to the start, it's absolutely jarring, and not in a good way.

3) Nothing is described to us. We don't know what characters look like, we don't know what anything on the planet looks like, we don't get anything described to us. We're supposed to do all the work ourselves imagining all the cool scifi things. It's not as much a problem in this story because it's so short, but it just continues on forever in the whole series so far with no sign of stopping. And no, "Murderbot wouldn't care" isn't an excuse. Murderbot is a fictional character. Martha Wells is choosing not to describe anything in this setting. You cannot get away from that fact by

blaming it on the character she's written. That's not how this works.

4) I'm telling you now: nothing in this series has real stakes.

It's fine in this book, because Murderbot still has access to an official Company cubicle for healing.

But that doesn't apply to the rest of the series. No injury Murderbot receives will have lasting damage, and usually gets completely fixed within a few pages, or before the chapter ends. Martha Wells uses grevious injuries for quick, cheap drama in the moment, but never wants to actually deal with the consequences, so everything gets magically fixed like it never happened. She does this with everything in her books, from betting blown to pieces, to mental

illness. Everything gets magically cured, and the protagonists will never /really/ be in any danger of losing in any way that actually matters.

There will be no physical or mental consequences to any of the injuries Murderbot or anyone else in this series ever sustains.

If you are looking for a series with real, grounded continuity and stakes, where every thing the characters do matters, don't go looking for it in any book by Martha Wells. She either has literal magical healing, or slaps a scifi label over top and it's still just magical healing.

This series is very light reading, easy to read. No complicated worldbuilding or characterization for you to delve into or get lost in, one way or another. There

are no real stakes outside of the drama of the moment, and that will inevitably get magically fixed before the chapter's out.

If you want light fun, with a sarcastic narrator who kicks ass, then you'll like it here.

If you want a serious story with real thoughtful representation of nonbinary and aroace people, and physically disabled people, then unfortunately you gotta look elsewhere. You can go check out The Imperial Radch series, which Martha Wells was apparently inspired by into writing this. Too bad the themes about gender and disability flew right over her head in a literal example of the "cool robot!" meme.